

Painter-composer Čiurlionis at Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent

A LIGHTER TOUCH AND A SOOTHING PALETTE

Since museums tend to circulate the same names over and over, it's especially refreshing to encounter an amazing survey by a historical figure whose oeuvre remains largely unknown. Numerous visual artists have been talented musicians, but only Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875-1911) composed 270 scores, including 170 short-piano works (many under a minute), and produced 300 paintings, drawings, and prints. Echoing his atonal musical compositions, painting titles reference musical forms such as preludes, fugues, sonatas, hymns, many of which are serialized like symphonic movements as Allegro, Andante, Scherzo and Finale. Teasing out the possibilities afforded Čiurlionis' visual seriality, this survey features thirteen complete series:

'Sonata I (Sonata of the Sun)', Sonata III (Sonata of the Serpent)', 'Sonata IV (Summer Sonata)', 'Sonata V (Son of the Sea)', 'Daybreak', 'The Prince's Journey', 'Winter', 'Funeral Symphony', 'Summer', 'Ritegards, Hymn', 'Sparks' and the thirteen-part 'Creator of the World'.

Before joining the Lithuanian independence movement, Čiurlionis described his early musical compositions in a 1902 letter to his uncle as "very

sad. They are redolent with Lithuanian longing, folk music melodies that my German composition professor (only naturally) fails to understand." An independent nation during the middle ages, Lithuania united with Poland in 1569, became increasingly 'Russified' following the 1863 Revolt, eventually regaining independence in 1918. While attending the Leipzig Royal Conservatory, Čiurlionis started painting over the 1901 winter break, eventually discovering the Symbolist paintings of Arnold Böcklin and Max Klinger in a Leipzig museum. Even if his music seems sad, his paintings are gentle and sweet, even loathing, though not as naïve as one might expect from such a brief painting career.

FANTASY LANDS

When one first explores Čiurlionis paintings, one senses stylistic affinities with late-19th-Century paintings by Ferdinand Hodler, Piet Mondrian, Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon, Jan Toorop and James McNeil Whistler, as well as paintings by American Modernists Arthur Dove and Georgia O'Keeffe. I would argue, however, that even if Čiurlionis' paintings mimic Symbolist styles, he employs a much-lighter touch and a soothing palette. Eschewing Symbolism's preference for universal mythical figures, heroic legends, and Biblical stories, his paintings characterize nature as mystical, convey cosmologies aligned with that era's Theosophical movement, and depict fantasy lands, possibly borrowed from Lithuanian folklore. With 'Serenity' (1903), originally an illustration for a hand-painted postcard, one notices a seaside mountain that seems haunted by some evil spirit.



MK Čiurlionis, 'Sprokofis', 1909, courtesy/MSK

More literally, a demon haunts the city featured in 'Fantasy (The Demon)' (1909), as well as numerous paintings of cemeteries and misty cities. Numerous paintings depict valleys from the perspective of mountaintops, shedding light on this region's distinct topography. When considered from the vantage of the Lithuanian independence movement, one can easily imagine these paintings kindling Lithuanians' appreciation for their homeland's vast natural resources. One imagines his painting 'Fairy Tale (Fairy Tale of the Kings)' (1909), portraying some legend of two ancient kings (a preliminary sketch depicts a light and dark king) simultaneously glimpsing a village suspended in a crystal ball, perhaps a reference to Lithuania's first Catholic King Mindaugas, who ordered his brother murdered in 1009 for refusing baptism.

Although scholars have been quick to assume that Čiurlionis had chromesthesia, a neurological condition whereby sounds conjure up colors while colors invoke sounds, this point proves trivial, since no two chromesthetes report the same color-sound relationships and only a small number of reports have been scientifically evaluated. One imagines, however, that his overall fascination with the mystical (the invisible), as well as his great musical talent and sophisticated training, inspired him to engage chromesthesia rhetorically, thus enabling him to depict the material world's known invisible vibrations by linking visual and acoustical phenomena. As if to illustrate how overlapping sounds remain distinct in musical compositions, his vibrant paintings feature highly layered skeins of superimposed colors, forms and lines.

What cannot be overstated is Čiurlionis' fabulous imagination and his attempts at non-representational painting, exemplified by 'Forest', 'Mist', 'Woods by a Lake', 'Winter II', and 'The Sun', or his drippy brushstrokes evoking melting, as with 'Daybreak', 'Winter VI', 'Summer', or 'Creation of the World IX'. All in all, this exhibition clearly connects his paintings' development in the context of his original role as a composer, involvement in the Lithuanian independence movement, and fascination with nature, whose seasonal changes and rhythms still spark aural and visual creativity.

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MK Čiurlionis, 'Dreams of Lithuania', until 15 December at Museum of Fine Arts, Ghentelpark, Ghent. Open Tue-Sun from 10 am-6 pm. www.mskgent.be